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No Music in Timbuktu:

A Brief Analysis of the Conflict in Mali and Al Qaeda's Rebirth

Nicholas Primo

Coordinator Daniel Benjamin of the State Department's Office of Counterterrorism spoke on December 8, 2011 to the National Press Club about the state of the terror group Al Qaeda (Benjamin, 2011). In his speech, the Coordinator declared that the strength of Al Qaeda, while still an ongoing threat to the security of the United States, had been significantly reduced primarily due to the termination of its founding leader, Osama bin Laden.

“There is no question that bin Laden's departure from the scene was the most important milestone ever in the fight against al-Qaida. Bin Laden was al-Qaida's founder and sole commander for 22 years. He was an iconic leader whose personal story had a profound attraction for violent extremists, and he was the prime advocate of the group's focus on America as a terrorist target... The loss of bin Laden puts the group on a path of decline that will be difficult to reverse” (Benjamin, 2011, para. 2).

Coordinator Benjamin went on to note several developments, including the movements towards democracy in various countries known as the Arab Spring, which further showed changes for the better in the Middle East. Still, he qualified that Al Qaeda, and more importantly its various affiliate groups remained an active threat, “Indeed, even as the core of al-Qaida experienced massive setbacks, activity by the affiliates continued to spread geographically, and other groups with AQ-related ideological leanings gained prominence” (Benjamin, 2011, para. 11).

Coordinator Benjamin argues that various Muslim countries of the region are moving away from Islamic fundamentalism that defines groups like Al Qaeda and towards freer societies, more

welcoming to the United States. According to the department, while still in existence, the remaining strength of Al Qaeda is no longer a threat to the United States (Benjamin, 2011).

Less than four months later on March 22, 2012, Malian soldiers in western Africa held a military coup, deposing the democratically elected President Amadou Toure and suspending the nation's constitution after two decades of peaceful governance (Al Jazeera; 2012). This led to a chain of events which ultimately allowed for the major Al Qaeda affiliate of the region, the Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Along with native Tuareg rebels, the AQIM took over vast territories in the northern part of Mali and called for the creation of an independent state of Azawad. Within three days, the three major cities of Northern Mali - Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu - fell to the rebel forces, effectively dividing the country in half (Al Jazeera, 2012). By April 6th, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), the primary Tuareg force in the north, declared independence from Mali altogether, calling on the international community to accept them as a sovereign entity (BBC News, 2012). While not considered the largest or most organized division of Al Qaeda, the forces of the AQIM did what other factions have never done before, exploited internal division in order to establish a base on a national level for their operations and terror attacks in the region as well as worldwide.

Months passed without progress by the Malian forces, except for infighting between factions of the Tuareg rebel groups of MNLA and the militant Islamic group of Ansar Dine, little changed in the north until France intervened on January 11, 2013 (Voice of America, 2013). With the support of French airborne brigades, the Malian forces began driving back the Islamist factions from northern cities, retaking Gao January 26, Timbuktu January 27 and Kidal January 28, effectively ending the occupation of AQIM of northern Mali and ending the Tuareg rebellion

(Voice of America, 2013). Now, the fighting has moved into the stage of defensive warfare around major cities as well as guerrilla operations in the Kidal Mountains and Sahara Desert where the fleeing Islamist forces have gathered (Voice of America, 2013). Operations are ongoing with little sign of ending soon. Despite the death of Osama bin Laden and despite the founding of several democratic governments in formerly despotic nations like Egypt and Libya, Al Qaeda remains a viable threat. This threat not only applies to Muslim countries in the Middle East and Africa, but to Europe and the United States as well.

This paper looks at the conflict in Mali as an example how the Islamic fundamentalism and global terrorism of Al Qaeda has not dissipated, despite the hopes of American foreign policy makers to the contrary. First, I will provide some background on the country Mali, including its geography, its people and a brief history of its government which, until recently had been the shining example of democracy on the African continent. I go into the events leading up to the collapse of the democratic regime and the subsequent rise to power of Al Qaeda in the North. Next, I discuss the response of Mali to the rebellion as well as the response of neighboring African countries. Then, I discuss the timely intervention of French forces that halted the advances of Islamist forces in the country and the continuing response of the international community, including the United States. Finally, I conclude by discussing possible solutions to resolve the chaos taking place, as well as possible options the United States has that will both benefit the suffering civilians of Mali as well as its security interests.

A Brief History of Mali

According to Lieutenant Colonel Kalifa Keita (1998) of the Army of the Republic of Mali, “The most substantial challenge to Mali’s stability since independence has been insurgency

by Tuareg peoples” (p. 6) The Tuaregs, a Berber people that dwell in the northern reaches of Mali differ drastically from the southern Malian tribes. They live a nomadic and pastoral life of herding and caravan trade, with unique cultural adaptations to the hostile environment of the Sahara (Keita, 1998). Thus over the decades, they have been subjugated as a lesser people in the political system of Mali. This division led to animosity, both on the parts of the Tuaregs and the Malians constantly combating them for control of the northern reaches of the country (Keita, 1998). This division currently defines the rebel movement, which includes the Tuareg community insidiously backed by the AQIM branch of Al Qaeda. While some in the West romanticize the roaming aspects of Tuareg life, the majority of Malians see them in a far more negative manner (Keita, 1998). Keita (1998) explains that, “West Africans tend to view the Tuaregs as lazy, prone to violence and criminality, opportunistic, ethnically chauvinistic, and unpatriotic. These views have been reinforced by Tuareg insurgencies in Mali and Niger” (p. 9). This hostility has remained a fundamental aspect of Malian life, and led to several conflicts over the decades between the north and south.

In many ways the geography of Mali mirrors its internal political struggles. The country of Mali lies in the western interior of the continent sharing borders with several countries, the largest of which is Algeria to the north. The northern portion of the country lies within the unforgiving Sahara desert, with poor resources, few cities and a population made up mostly of nomadic tribes. The south, meanwhile, contains parts of the Niger River and benefits from tropical forests and good soil due to the Inter-tropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) (Gordon, 1996). This zone allows for good rain seasons, better conditions for farming and thus greater prosperity (Gordon, 1996).

This geographic divide mirrors the current struggle between north and south. Although the south is more prosperous, it struggled economically since its independence from France in 1960 (Keita, 1998). The new government first turned to socialism, but later Western capitalism and influence when economic growth failed to materialize (Keita, 1998). According to Lieutenant Colonel Keita (1998), who fought in the Army of the Republic of Mali against the Tuaregs in 1990, weak economic growth and stagnate social development, still resonated bitter feelings in the Northern regions of Mali like Kidal. This limited development of infrastructure and economic stability only reinforced the perception among many Tuaregs that their suffering was the result of Malian hatred and discrimination (Keita, 1998). Despite all efforts at reconciliation after the Tuareg rebellions, the Tuaregs still consider themselves the true heirs and owners of their ancestral lands. For some, this also includes ownership of the riches in gold and uranium they believe lie hidden underneath the sands of the desert (Welsh, 2012). The Tuaregs thus continue to harbor dreams of independence and are willing to attain it through any means necessary.

Finally, religion plays a significant role in Mali. Over 90% of the country is Muslim (Department of State, 2008). However, this 90% is not of the same religious or ideological mind as Al Qaeda. The Tuaregs, though joined with the AQIM to gain political freedom from the Malian government, for the most part do not follow the fundamental Islamic tradition of Sharia espoused by Al Qaeda (Welsh, 2012). Some Tuareg independence groups such as Ansar Dine are Salafist, or radical Islamist (Welsh, 2012). The rest, including the relatively secular MNLA, follow a form of Sufi Islam mixed with many African traditions (Welsh, 2012). As one Tuareg nomad put it, “We are Muslims but we can't stand the Salafi way. We want our sisters to feel the

wind in their hair” (Welsh, 2012, para. 59). Thus, the conflict is not one motivated by jihad, at least for the native Tuaregs that make up the majority of the rebellion. The policy of Al Qaeda towards music and the sacred sites in Timbuktu also estranged many still in the north (Conan, 2012). Jihad soldiers destroyed many sights and even “eviscerated” entire scores of music (Conan, 2012, para. 22). Ultimately, AQIM and its men may control the rebellion, but their ideology is not necessarily accepted by the people they control.

The Collapse of Democracy

One of the more interesting aspects of the situation in Mali is that, although within a climate of political change away from autocratic governments towards democratic ones, Mali did the opposite. Instead of heading towards democratic governance, it reverted to political instability and civil war by a military coup. This is not new to Mali however. In fact, the cycle of economic weakness, Tuareg grievances fomenting into rebellion and military coup replacing ineffective governance fits a very basic pattern in the historical fabric of the country. In 1968, eight years after Mali’s independence, fourteen young but frustrated army officers under Lieutenant Moussa Traore ousted socialist reformer Modibo Keita due to his failure to repress a Tuareg rebellion over the lack of economic progress (Keita, 1998). Under Traore, Mali shifted towards capitalism and Western investment for economic growth, but after two decades found little success (Keita, 1998). This lack of economic improvement and failed development of the Northern provinces led to a second Tuareg rebellion in 1990 (Keita, 1998). Though also repressed, their grievances led to a “Committee of Transition for the Safety of the People” which positioned another army official Lieutenant Colonel Amadou Toumany Toure to be the first democratically elected President of Mali in 1991 (Keita, 1998). The country remained an

exceptional example of the possibilities of any African nation that accepted democracy for nearly two decades. Yet, the one consistent tension within Mali is the Tuaregs demands, threats to social stability and conflict with Malian soldiers. This endless fighting once again led to an increasing sense of frustration among the current soldiers of the Malian army, unable to effectively counter the Tuareg opposition. This frustration ultimately led them to turn against the Toure administration in an attempt to properly defend the country themselves.

Unbeknown to the majority of the army, for the past year Al Qaeda insurgents were infiltrating the northern regions of Mali. The AQIM, initially the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) that fought for Islamic fundamentalism in Algeria, affiliated itself with Osama bin Laden in 2007 for greater financial support and name recognition (Steinberg and Werenfels, 2007). This change in name was seen by the Algerians as a sign of decline and weakness at first, but as German foreign policy experts Steinberg and Werenfels (2007) state, “reports about growing recruitment of non-Algerian North Africans and the spread of terrorist activities in neighbouring countries hint at the fact that al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb – while losing some support among Algerians – might at the same time win more internationalist minded young North Africans” (p. 412). Their analysis proved to be correct, with the current conflict in Mali as evidence to the spread of the AQIM’s influence and ability to destabilize the regions North and West Africa.

Many of these Salafist Muslims, recruited across the Middle East, Africa as well as among Malian Tuaregs, crossed over to Libya during the 2011 Civil War to fight for Muammar Kaddafi. When the Kaddafi regime fell, these soldiers returned to their homes with training and heavy weaponry. Some like Colonel Habi Sadat, who deserted the Malian army to join the rebels

in 2012, noticed the presence of Al Qaeda, “Mali opened the field to al-Qaeda - to roam among the camps and villages, to build relationships with the people” (Welsh, 2012, para. 56). This in part fueled many soldiers into turning against the president. This implicit acceptance of Tuaregs and jihadists moving through the north, made the job of soldiers more difficult in effectively fighting them (Welsh, 2012). Still, many in Mali, including the army and the subsequent interim unity cabinet, did not realize the threat to the north (Welsh, 2012). Once the government fell and the army consolidated its forces to the south in order to gain complete control, the AQIM and its Tuareg supporters quickly took over the cities of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu in a three day offensive (Welsh, 2012).

The state of the northern half of the country became one of strife and suffering. Thousands of Malians fled south to the Malian capital of Bamako, further straining the fragile government still in flux between army and new political control (Conan, 2012). Not only that, but in the north, Al Qaeda soldiers imposed Sharia law, prosecuted women and destroyed heretical structures that did not fit with the ideological parameters of the organization (Conan, 2012). Many who fled the northern half of Mali brought with them stories of abuse to women and destruction of sacred buildings due to the new order (Conan, 2012). Still, the desire of the Tuaregs for political independence came within reach as a result of the strength and support of the AQIM. Despite their own distrust of the group, they were the enemies of their long standing enemies. Until convinced that their best interest lie with returning Mali to a single nation, the Tuaregs remained unwilling to fight the ones now in control, Al Qaeda (Conan, 2012).

Responses to Rebellion: Mali, Africa and the World

The new Malian government and the Malian army had great difficulty in combating the AQIM in the north. After removing the garrisons of soldiers from the northern cities of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu to implement the coup in the south, the army had many setbacks in regaining those cities from the forces of Al Qaeda and the Tuaregs (Conan, 2012). Further sapping its strength, the army split its force to maintain order in the south and its interim unity government. Eventually this caused the Malian government to seek aid outside its borders, mostly with Algeria to the north (Conan, 2012). Nigeria and several other neighboring African nations represented by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) also raised concerns about the new Malian government and the way it came to power at the hands of the military (Conan, 2012). Even more worrisome to the members of ECOWAS was the threat of rebellion spreading to their own nations (Conan, 2012). Several have their own nomadic populations similar to the Tuaregs - at risk of resorting to rebellion for political autonomy (Conan, 2012). Furthermore, the threat of civil war and internal strife has the added concern of attracting more Al Qaeda affiliates, dragging the entire region into chaos, and the threat of terrorist attacks (Conan, 2012). All of these threats have for the time being united several African nations to solve the issue and restore order between the rebellious Tuaregs of Mali and the rest of the country. How they will oust the rebels or defeat the Islamic fundamentalism taking root there is still very much an obstacle to resolving the conflict.

Help came not from the United States but rather Mali's former colonial ruler, France. Seeing a potential threat to Algeria just north of Mali and the French homeland itself, President Francois Hollande entered the conflict in January 11, 2013 (Voice of America, 2013). Quick and decisive deployment of French airborne brigades turned the tide of the war almost immediately

against the Islamist forces of AQIM. With better intelligence, military resources and training, the combined French and Malian troops moved north, recapturing the primary cities of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal (Voice of America, 2013). This success came as a result of internal divisions of the Tuareg resistance. While initially accepting of the AQIM's resources and strength, the Tuaregs of the MNLA soon found themselves at odds with the methods of their allies and their own Islamist faction of Tuareg, the Ansar Dine (Voice of America, 2013). With the repression of music, culture and destruction of holy sites in cities like Timbuktu, fighting broke out in the city of Gao on June 26, 2012 (Voice of America, 2013). The MNLA and other Tuaregs fighting for independence, but not Sharia law or Islamic fundamentalism, were expelled from the city, turning to the Malian government and the international community for aid in expelling their now realized enemy in AQIM. With the arrival of the French the next year, the MNLA, forsaking its goal of independence for the moment, joined in the common cause of defeating AQIM, even going so far as to expel them from the city of Kidal (Voice of America, 2013). These combined efforts led to the military defeat of AQIM and their removal from power. It also signaled the beginning of guerrilla war in the massive desert regions of the north (Voice of America, 2013).

The United States, while committed to defeating Al Qaeda and its affiliates, are having a difficult time coping with the drastic changes in Mali. While calling on the rebels in the north to stand down in their war against the Malian government and stop its human rights violations, it has not wholly supported the Malian government either (Bureau of African Affairs, 2012). Due to the military coup that ousted the democratic and popular President Toure, the United States condemned the way in which the new government seized control simultaneously with the

rebellion (Bureau of African Affairs, 2012). This sent a mixed signal to the Malian government, unsure whether the United States was willing to support their struggle with an Al Qaeda led opposition. The Obama administration and the State Department have also had difficulty in whether or not to consider the conflict as a major threat to the United States. According the State Department website, the rebels of Mali are not called Al Qaeda affiliates by name (Bureau of African Affairs, 2012). Yet such a devious group, which was able to gain control of a country by taking advantage of the openness of the democratic Malian regime in order to exploit the grievances of the northern Tuaregs only hints at the potential damage such an organization can do to reach its aims of religiously-motivated war. Therefore, although the United States may not like the fact that a once democratic state has now unleashed a terrorist threat in Africa and the globe, it must decide which threat is greatest and move forward in resolving the conflict (Bureau of African Affairs, 2012).

Potential Solutions

The conflict in Mali continues, and though the timely intervention of French airborne troops and reversal of MNLA alliance turned the tide against AQIM, a guerrilla campaign is now underway with no signs of resolving itself. The first suicide attacks of the conflict started January 26, 2013 in Gao (Al Jazeera, 2013). Islamist militants also use car bombs to attack checkpoints, especially ones manned by MNLA forces (BBC, 2013). Several nations, including the United States, pledged intelligence, resources, training officials and even drones for French and Malian troops (Schmitt, 2013). West African nations also came to the aid of Mali, but more for their own security rather than Mali's (Conan, 2012). Fears of similar rebellions taking place in Nigeria and Algeria, where Tuareg groups reside in various untamed regions, makes this conflict of vital

importance throughout the region, with several different proposals for possible solutions to the conflict (Conan, 2012). The Malian government continues to seek support from its neighbors, France and the United Nations in curtailing the spread of the Al Qaeda led rebels (Conan, 2012).

At this point the United States has limited options it can take in supporting the Malian government in combating AQIM. The United States could join France in combat and add its military predominance to the conflict. This is unlikely as the United States does not have the popular support or the political will to intervene in another foreign conflict as a result of the unpopularity of its costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq earlier in the decade. The United States can also continue its current level of support with its minor presence in training African troop and increased intelligence through its drone program (Schmitt, 2013). This, for now, seems the most cost-effective and easily supportable position in the Malian conflict (Schmitt, 2013). However, if President Obama wishes to combat the growing presence of AQIM in northern Africa, bold steps must be taken. In this case, Mali provides a unique opportunity for the foundation of policy that can dramatically alter the situation in North Africa.

It is clear now that Mali must answer the issue of Tuareg independence if it ever wishes to reach a level of national security and stability. As the third repeated instance of political and social instability as a result of Tuareg rebellion, Mali can no longer ignore the will of its own people. Past promises of development have failed to reform the northern reaches of the country (Keita, 1998). Past threats of force from the Malian government have only managed to subdue nationalist sentiments for decades at a time (Keita, 1998). Changes in regime have only muted the underlying tensions, but never fully dealt with them. Thus, I argue the best option the Malian

government can take and one the United States should call for and support is the independence of northern Mali and the creation of a new state of Azawad.

It is certainly recognized that the conflict in Mali is a unique situation. The policies pertinent to it should not be broadly or categorically applied to every future conflict against Al Qaeda affiliates in Africa, the Middle East or any other region of the world. Still, making northern Mali an independent state ruled by Tuaregs would give them the independence they have strived for since France freed Mali in 1960. It would reduce the financial burden of Mali by removing the north from its jurisdiction. Rather than diverting precious resources to develop the north and protecting its borders, costs that had in the past sapped the ability of Mali to govern the entire country, would now be gone, allowing them to focus development entirely in the south. Furthermore, Tuaregs could promote their own form of government based on their own cultural heritage. The main objections to this option stem from Mali and its neighboring nations with similar Tuareg groups. Allowing the Tuaregs in Mali their autonomy would stir similar desires in Niger and Algeria where Tuaregs live on lands with huge deposits of natural resources (Conan, 2012). Losing such resources could certainly harm the economies of these various countries. Not only that, but many African nations would argue that there is no legal justification for the creation of a new state which their former colonial power France never authorized at the time of independence (Gordon, 1996).

The question thus becomes which is the lesser of two evils facing Mali and its neighbors in the region. Mali can maintain the status quo, use the forces of France to win a temporary victory over Islamist militants, and try to develop the north so that the Tuaregs never rise up again. This is what Mali has done since 1960, with the results readily apparent. But, Mali can

also completely upend the policy norms of the region by giving the Tuaregs the independence they want, removing the main motivation for strife and the main tool AQIM used to divide the nation in the first place. The onus lies with these African governments in Mali and its neighbors, as well as with the international community and the United States, to put aside these fears and come to the understanding that the Tuaregs might indeed gain some political autonomy if it means securing the country and by default the region against terrorist plots. France, as the original colonial ruler of the region and country to bestow independence in 1960 could play a critical role by supporting Tuareg independence and the creation of Azawad.

Of course, the Tuaregs would initially need greater aid from foreign institutions and Western nations in providing the proper governmental apparatus and expelling terrorist groups like AQIM. However, the United States, France, and ECOWAS have already contributed valuable resources and manpower just to stave off the collapse of the Malian state. Rather than waiting for the next Tuareg uprising, resolving the decades-long issue now with independence would remove the problem all together. Tuaregs would also be expected to take on the responsibility of security, reject the notions of Islamic fundamentalism and remove all harbingers of the ideology from the area. Still, with the prospect of independence, such responsibilities, would be accepted and end an issue that has plagued the nation for over five decades.

Ultimately, the resolution to the conflict in Mali depends on a community of nations coming together to halt the advances of AQIM. Instability should not be risked for the sake of denying a portion of the population political rights and freedom. There is the potential to convince all Tuaregs to abandon their Al Qaeda allies for the sake of security, freedom and the possibility of true political autonomy. However, such plans should be made in earnest, before the

conflict can spread to other countries and engulf the entire region in chaos and upheaval that threaten not only Africa, but the United States as well.

Foreign policy expert Brian Jenkins (2012) of the RAND Corporation wrote in his analysis of the decline of Al Qaeda that one of the most important things to learn about the enemy is their understanding of the conflict with the West; “In their view, war is perpetual – this conflict began centuries ago and will last beyond their [current jihadists] lives” (p. ix). The United States has made tremendous progress with fighting Al Qaeda since it emerged as a threat in 2001. The death of leaders like Osama bin Laden and the several other counterterrorism programs around the globe have made the United States safer and weakened the threat of Al Qaeda from what they once were (Benjamin, 2012). Having said all of this, the current form of Al Qaeda in its small, spread out and amorphous organization is still very deadly to the citizens of the United States. While the country of Mali far off in the African continent remains one of the most misunderstood and unrecognized places on earth, it has the potential to play a huge part in American security. Allowing Al Qaeda to fester there will only lead to future conflicts in the region, and more importantly future threats to the American homeland. It should be a top priority for the United States government, not to become complacent with past victories over Al Qaeda, but remain vigilant, so that future attacks never occur from places like Mali.

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